



SOUTHWEST WASHINGTON HEALTH DISTRICT

Preserving, promoting, and protecting health in Clark and Skamania Counties.

Environmental Health Services MEMORANDUM

DRAFT COPY

TO: Growth Management Act Steering Committee

FROM: Lou Dooley, Director of Environmental Health

DATE: June 6, 2001

Issue: Protection Of Ground Water Under The Growth Management Act

History: The Vancouver area has grown very rapidly. Many new homes were built to accommodate that growth. The infrastructure, primarily sewer and water utilities, was developed or improved to facilitate the new subdivisions. In some cases, subdivisions were developed before public utilities were available. Septic systems were substituted for public sewer. Public water service is less expensive and more easily constructed. For this reason, small lots were created based on public water and septic systems. It was often projected or believed that sewer service would follow the build-out of the new subdivisions; while this often occurred, there are many examples where it did not. As the neighborhoods matured landscaping changes stressed septic systems. Patios and decks were constructed which covered septic tanks and drainfields. Detached garages, carports or shops further encumbered the limited space available for septic systems. As systems began to fail from misuse or old age, repairs became very difficult. Dry wells were often constructed to replace the drainfield. Some dry wells were even permitted. Dry wells damage ground

water and create significant public health risks. Few repairs were accomplished via permit; far more were not.

Septic systems are a very appropriate way to treat and dispose of sewage on rural settings with rural densities. They are not appropriate on half acre or smaller lots where urban densities have evolved. The worst-case scenario is often found in our urbanized areas. Septic systems have reached the age of 25 to 40 years, an age where failure is expected. The lots have been developed to where little unencumbered land exists to replace a septic system. Septic systems fail at different rates, so a homeowner wanting to connect to public sewer finds that his neighbors are often unwilling to spend the money to connect until their system fails. The cost to connect is greatly reduced when an entire neighborhood connects at the same time. The result is that the failed system is replaced with a marginal (as inexpensive as possible) repair, and this homeowner no longer has interest in connecting to sewer.

Policies are needed by staff to make septic system decisions when high-density areas exist within urban boundaries.

A recent example: Sewer collection lines were run to a new development. The new line passed directly in front of ten homes. Three of these residences were served by sand filter systems (one was a repair). The area had obvious soil deficiencies making reliance on septic systems a poor choice. Because there were no systems on record as failing, connection to sewer for these existing residences was not required. This may not be good planning or utilization of urban services. There are many islands of septic systems within the urban areas. These neighborhoods could be, readily serviced by sewer.

Property owners often reject sewer connection based on cost and the belief that septic systems are an adequate sewage disposal method. Given the number of

dwellings served by cesspools and drywells in these islands surrounded by public sewers, it may be time to be more aggressive in requiring sewer connection. The excellent work done on critical areas, ground water determination and the Burnt Bridge Creek (surface water) studies strongly suggest that the time has passed for dwellings on septic systems, where sewer connection is available.

Conclusions: Sewer systems are available within the urban growth boundaries. Septic systems are known contributors to degradation of our ground water resources. Policies requiring no new septic system construction and hook up to existing sewer lines within Growth Management Boundaries would protect our ground water.

Recommendation: The SWWHD would strongly advocate for strategies that maximize sewer service and eliminate septic system utilization in areas of urban density, and recommends the establishment of countywide policies for:

- 1.) Reduction of existing septic systems within urban growth boundaries
- 2.) Prohibition of new septic systems within the urban growth boundaries

Implementation: Planning & development staff of the SWWHD, Clark County, City of Vancouver, City of Camas, City of Washougal, City of Battle Ground, City of Ridgefield, and the Hazel Dell Sewer District will develop policies to be consistently enforced across all sewered jurisdictions. Such policies will be presented to the committee for approval.